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ABSTRACT

In the 1930s, Mexican rural schools became arenas for cultural politics--the process of articulating and disputing definitions of culture, from national identity to the broader sense of social behavior and meaning. Created in 1921, the Secretaria de Educacion Publica (SEP) set up federal rural schools to nationalize and modernize rural peasants. The SEP was dominated by leftists who aimed to build a national party based on worker, peasant, and middle-class support. Their cultural program, known as socialist education, targeted the countryside. Socialist education attacked superstition, religion, and the church; stressed collective learning and organization; taught productive habits such as gardening to children; and organized adults in agrarian associations and anti-alcohol and sanitation campaigns. Indigenous and multiethnic elements of popular culture were celebrated and packaged as national culture. Teachers became explicit political actors, instructed to organize peasants and workers to press for federal agrarian and labor laws that would redistribute wealth and power. In this book, four case studies examine how this agenda played out in rural communities in Puebla and Sonora states, focusing on relationships between federal teachers; the states' conservative governors; and Mexico's most radical president, Lazaro Cardenas. The communities include two types of mestizo communities (traditional agrarian and resettled agribusiness workers) and two types of indigenous societies (the village-based Nahuas of Sierra Norte and the recently conquered, tribally cohesive Yaquis of Sonora). Each community participated in its own way in the negotiation of cultural politics through schooling in the 1930s and helped to construct a shared national language for consent and resistance--a dynamic basis for civil society unique in Latin America. Contains references, notes, an extensive bibliography, and an index. (SV)